RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

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Housing Options Upon Discharge from Correctional Facilities

INTRODUCTION

This study examined current programs that assist offenders in finding suitable housing at the time of release from provincial and federal correctional facilities in Canada. The research focused mainly on British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 was national in scope; it included a literature review and a jurisdictional scan. The literature review determined what was known about the need for re-housing services, described the types of services available, and identified services that are believed to be effective. The jurisdictional scan identified the main re-housing services, including federal, provincial, and community-level services, available in each Canadian province.

Phase 2 focused on three provinces: British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec. Each of these provinces has a range of correctional institutions at all levels of security which, combined, house a culturally diverse group of offenders.

Between May and July 2006, the researchers interviewed 7 key informants at the national level, 6 in British Columbia, 17 in Ontario and 14 in Quebec. Key informants included correctional facility staff at the provincial and federal level, probation and parole staff, and community agencies. The researchers also heard from a group of female inmates in British Columbia and a group of male ex-prisoners in Ontario.

Key informants were asked about the types of housing challenges faced by ex-offenders when they leave prison; what supports and services are available to help ex-prisoners maintain or obtain housing; challenges and supports for correctional facility staff in helping prisoners obtain housing; strengths and limitations of the existing services; and what additional supports or services are required.

FINDINGS

Housing and the Justice System

Housing issues become relevant at specific points in an individual's contact with the justice system.

- Prior to the court hearing: The accused may be held on remand prior to the court hearing. In this case, the individual is unable to continue working and may not be able to make rent or mortgage payments on existing accommodation. The accused may be held for a lengthy period without knowledge of when, or if, he/she will be released.
- Upon sentencing/while incarcerated: If the accused is found guilty of an offence and is given a custodial sentence (that is, sentenced to prison), he/she will be placed in a provincial correctional facility if the sentence is two years less a day, or in a federal correctional facility if the sentence is two years or more. While they are incarcerated, many offenders lose any housing arrangements they had prior to incarceration. Offenders serving lengthy sentences are more likely to become isolated from their family and community, and to lose social connections related to employment or housing.
- Upon discharge: In some instances, an offender is released gradually back into the community towards the end of the sentence. For example, an offender may be given day parole to work in the community by day and return to the correctional facility at night, or may be placed in a halfway house. In other instances, the offender is simply released into the community directly from prison.

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The Need for Re-housing Supports

One of the first issues a prisoner must deal with upon release is finding a place to stay. It has been estimated that 30 per cent of individuals incarcerated in Canada will have no homes to go to upon their release. Many prisoners have characteristics that make it difficult to obtain housing, such as lack of education, lack of stable employment, previous homelessness, addiction issues, mental health issues or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). Furthermore, ex-prisoners may be released into communities far from home, possibly without identification papers, and they may have restrictive parole conditions that impact their housing search.

Since most ex-prisoners have relatively little in the way of resources, their choices tend to be limited to shelters, halfway houses (see below), supportive housing, subsidized housing and private rooming houses. In terms of housing in the private rental market—although this represents the largest stock of available housing—ex-prisoners have very limited possibilities due to lack of resources and to the fact that, in most provinces, landlords can legally discriminate against those with criminal records. High-quality private sector housing is, therefore, largely "off limits." Furthermore, halfway houses are only for those on conditional release, supportive housing is in short supply, and subsidized housing has long waiting lists. As a result, ex-prisoners tend to live in substandard private housing, such as rundown rooming houses in high-risk neighbourhoods.

When prisoners being released have few outside supports and do not have access to comprehensive and situationally relevant discharge planning, they have a high probability of being released to a situation of homelessness, which in turn increases their likelihood of re-incarceration.

Types of Re-housing Services and Supports

There are four common types of services available to help offenders find suitable housing at the time of release from provincial and federal correctional facilities.

- halfway houses: community-based residential facilities that enable offenders to serve a portion of their sentence under supervision in the community
- transitional residences: short- or long-term accommodation with access to a mix of support services that enable an individual to move towards self-sufficiency
- pre-release services: assistance with individual planning related to housing provided to prisoners while they are in the correctional facility
- post-release services: assistance to ex-prisoners with finding short- or long-term housing, usually through referrals and counselling.

In addition to these services, which directly target housing for ex-offenders, the following approaches and services are believed to be effective in helping inmates retain and/or find and maintain housing upon release. Many of these are uncommon or non-existent in Canada.

- programs that enable inmates to retain their housing while incarcerated
- re-entry planning that begins at the time of sentencing
- programming that specifically targets inmates who are likely to become homeless on release
- programs that provide information about housing services or that maintain landlord registries in the area where the ex-offender wishes to live
- legislation, including laws that prevent landlords from discriminating on the basis of a criminal record, and policies that define certain ex-prisoners as a priority need group for housing purposes
- transfer of offenders to pre-release facilities near the offender's intended home, so they can begin to search for housing and work, re-connect with family and loved ones, and access community supports
- utilization of community services within jails, to provide stronger support to inmates who have a history of homelessness, as well as those with mental illness, addictions, or FASD.

Finally, the supply of affordable housing, generally, has a profound impact on ex-offenders' ability to find suitable housing on release. Accordingly, efforts to increase the supply of affordable housing would improve housing options for prisoners on release from correctional facilities.

Availability of Re-housing Services and Supports

At the provincial level, there are few re-housing services available. As funding became more restricted, British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec have cut housing-related services in general. At one time, housing services had been included in discharge planning, but none of the three provinces are currently engaged in routine discharge planning. British Columbia has begun a pilot project in which discharge planning services are being provided, to determine how effective the services will be in facilitating a smooth transition to the community. If the study indicates that the services are effective, they will be implemented province-wide.

Discharge planning does occur for those being released from federal facilities, starting about one year prior to the anticipated release date. The discharge planning officer works with the offender to identify needs and develop feasible plans to address them. Housing tends to be addressed first. None of the other issues can be dealt with until housing is addressed, given that any services required must be provided in the community in which the offender will reside.

At the federal level, gradual release programs are used to aid in re-integrating offenders into the community. Prior to completion of the full sentence, an offender may be released into the community to live in a supervised setting (halfway house). While living there, offenders are provided with supports to adjust to the community and all of the changes that have occurred since their incarceration. They are also provided with relevant programming to address their needs (for example, mental health counselling, substance abuse counselling, employment skills training). When their stay in the halfway house is almost completed, staff supports them in their search for housing.

At the provincial level, there seems to be a trend away from gradual release. None of the three provinces included in the case study operate their own halfway houses any more. Ontario and Quebec still purchase beds from community organizations on a per diem basis, but British Columbia does not use community beds at all.

Most community agencies that provide services of any type to ex-offenders living in the community provide support to secure housing along with related programs and services that will assist the person in retaining housing (for example, employment support). Ex-offenders are provided with support in obtaining identification, getting a job, finding a place to live, and making applications for subsidized housing and social assistance. They may also receive some financial assistance with first and last months' rent.

Availability of Assistance in Retaining Housing while Incarcerated

No services were identified which help people entering correctional facilities to retain their housing, either at the provincial or federal level. Even in cases where people were held pending bail (were held on remand), there were no services provided, despite the fact that the indeterminate imprisonment could have significant consequences for an individual's housing and employment situation.

Variation in Services Among Men, Women, Youth and Other Groups

Women require services that can address their need for safe, secure housing. These women often have children who lived in alternative placements with family, friends, or children's services while the women were in prison. The women need to re-establish themselves with their children, and they require housing that is sufficient for their family. Many of the community-based housing services available to women are for those fleeing situations of violence. Women coming from prison are therefore not eligible; they face problems securing temporary housing while searching for something more permanent.

Youth face difficulties, given that there are few services in any location for "transitional aged youth."[1] There are limited resources available for them in terms of housing options, specialized housing, and related community programs and services which would help them secure and retain housing.

Many offenders face problems with mental illness. Although they often require specialized housing, there is little available. In many cases, they find housing in rooming houses. In these settings, they do not get the supports they require, including supports to ensure they have and are continuing to take medications. Landlords generally do not like to provide housing to those with mental illness, although some programs support landlords who are willing to do so. Offenders with FASD likewise need supportive housing that is in short supply. Offenders with addictions also need housing that supports their recovery; eligibility requirements for residential programs can make it difficult for them to access these programs.

Aboriginal people have some culturally specific housing options available to them but, again, the supply is limited.

Services and Supports Perceived as Being Effective

In general, gradual release was seen as a very effective way of re-integrating offenders following a period of incarceration. The time spent in a halfway house allows the offender to adjust to living in the community, get the services needed, such as mental health counselling or substance abuse treatment, and secure suitable housing and supports to retain housing (for example, employment or social assistance).

Supportive housing was also considered effective. Many individuals in prison have special needs that can only be addressed through supportive housing specific to those needs (for example, mental health).

Service Gaps

Generally, existing services are not sufficiently funded and otherwise resourced to meet the needs of clients. Therefore, more funding is needed, regardless of the type of service.

The following are key services that are missing:

- assistance to help individuals held on remand retain their housing
- assistance to help individuals entering correctional facilities retain their housing
- linkages between systems that would help offenders retain their housing (for example, linkages between prisons and social assistance and health services)
- discharge planning at the provincial level
- use of gradual release at the provincial level

1 "Transitional aged youth" is a term used by health and social services to refer to people in their late teens or in their 20s for whom the child or adult services for which they are eligible are not necessarily appropriate.

- transportation from court to prison to collect belongings, and/or from prison to the community
- case management in the community
- better regulation of rooming houses in all provinces, but especially recovery houses in British Columbia
- supportive housing for special needs groups
- housing and support services for transitional age youth
- housing for elderly offenders released from prison
- affordable housing in appropriate locations
- supports to families during imprisonment and following release
- housing and programs for sexual offenders
- housing services for offenders based on best practice research

CONCLUSIONS

Ex-prisoners face substantial challenges in finding housing upon release from correctional facilities. There is a lack of affordable housing in Canadian cities, generally, which makes it more challenging for ex-offenders to find a place to live. In addition, many ex-offenders are cut off from their previous support networks, and have no place to go upon release. Many also have characteristics that make it more difficult to find housing.

At the federal level, some supports, such as gradual release and discharge planning, are available to help a prisoner find suitable housing. At the provincial level, in the three provinces studied, there was very little in the way of discharge planning and there was a trend away from gradual release. There are no services available to help inmates retain their housing while incarcerated. Most housing services, including supportive housing for special needs groups, are provided by community agencies; these are reported to be under-funded and therefore insufficient to meet the demand.

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Housing Research at CMHC

Under Part IX of the ***National Housing Act***, the Government of Canada provides funds to CMHC to conduct research into the social, economic and technical aspects of housing and related fields, and to undertake the publishing and distribution of the results of this research.

This fact sheet is one of a series intended to inform you of the nature and scope of CMHC's research.

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